Article by Elsie Bell Grosvenor, December 13, 1940

1940, Dec. 13 MEMORIES OF MY FATHER by Elsie May Bell Grosvenor

One of my earliest childhood memories is of the time my father called me and told me that Santa Claus wanted to talk to me on the telephone. I was greatly surprised and as I had just reached the stage in my development when I was beginning to wonder if there really was a Santa Claus, the incident made a great impression on me. Our telephone was the old fashioned box kind on the wall where you had to ring a bell to get central. I was so small that I had to stand on a chair to reach the telephone. I remember my surprise when a very jovial voice came over the telephone saying, “Is this Elsie?” and when I answered that it was, hearing “This is Santa Claus.” “Is it really Santa Claus?” I asked. “Yes, it is really Santa Claus.” “Where are you, Santa Claus?” I asked. “I'm up in Greenland,” he said. “Have you really got reindeer and are you coming down here?” I asked next. “Yes, I've really got reindeer and I'm getting my packs ready to come down and bring presents to good little girls. What do you want me to bring you?” By this time I was convinced that it was Santa Claus, and I told him in great detail all of the things I wanted. I finally got down from the chair in a daze and turned to my father who had been standing beside me. “Isn't it wonderful to be able to talk to Santa Claus?” I asked; then still thinking hard, said “My, the telephone is a wonderful thing. I wonder who invented it. Do you know, Father?” I was thunderstruck when he told me that he did, that he had invented it himself.

Several years later in school one day the teacher said my father wanted me to be excused from school to go somewhere with him. I returned home quite aflutter to have my father tell me that there was a case up in the Supreme Court and that a man was trying to prove that my father had not invented the telephone and my father thought I might like to go to hear the testimony. I was delighted at the thought of going with my father and danced up and down with glee. But my father 2 said, “I will take you on one condition — that no matter what is said about me, no matter what names people call me, if they call me a liar or a thief

— you will keep absolutely quiet and will not say one word." "Nobody would think of saying such things about you, Papa," I said, but he said, "Will you promise?" I promised and thereupon was dressed up in my best bib and tucker and with my father and mother drove down to the Capitol where the Supreme Court was holding session. It was evident that my father knew his little daughter very well, because if he had not extracted that promise from me, I would certainly have said something when so indignant was I when I heard a very flowery, oratorical individual calling my father a liar and a thief, saying that the wealthy man had stolen the invention from a poor indigent professor — that my father had visited the professor, talked with him and then stolen his invention — that my father was a crook and a liar. My father laid a restraining hand on me and I did manage to sit quietly through the fiery indictment. When the lawyer for the prosecution got through and the lawyer for the Telephone Company got up I expected to hear him defend my father in equally violent language and that Mr. — would be denounced in the same terms that had been applied to my father. You can imagine my disgust and astonishment when Mr. — began to talk in a cool, calm manner and without saying a word about my father began to give dates and facts in such a low voice that it was almost impossible to hear him. I felt that things were being very badly mismanaged, and although my father seemed perfectly satisfied with the way things were going, I couldn't understand it. However, my father was vindicated when the case was thrown out of court a few weeks later.

It was, therefore, with very considerable surprise when my daughter Gloria returned one day from her class at George Washington University that I heard her say one of her professors had said there was some doubt as to the discoverer of the telephone, that there were several claimants besides Alexander Graham Bell. 3 for that honor and that, in fact, one of them had filed his claim on the very same day that Mr. Bell had filed his, and that the professor himself had wondered whether an injustice had not been done.

This brought very forcibly to me the remembrance that an authoritative biography of my father has not been written, and it made me try to remember some of the many stories my father used to tell me. It was also one reason why I was glad that the film of my father's

life, ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL, was shown, for although the incidents were not exactly true to life, the spirit of the film and the main facts were correct. Many of the speeches, such as those in the court-room scene, were taken verbatim from letters of my father. Much of the testimony presented in the many telephone suits to support my father's claim for priority came from lettersto his parents, fiancee and friends.

The telephone patent is considered one of the most valuable ever issued. It described the discovery that an electrical current could be changed in intensity and thus could be made to transmit human speech. The first discovery of the make and break current, which is used in telegraphing, cannot be used to transmit speech. So that most of the modern developments of electricity such as radio have grown out of this discovery.

The application for a telephone patent was drawn up by a very competent firm of lawyers, but in looking it over, my father discovered a weak spot in the patent-the description of his undulating current which made the telephone possible was not clearly described. He spent many hours working over the patent — making sure his new current was carefully explained. This was the part of the patent which was attacked in the courts, but so well had my father drawn it that every suit was decided in his favor.

Another letter also played a very important part in the suits. Because of legal technicalities, it was decided to file the Canadian patents first, and my 4 father waited weeks for his Canadian agent to take action. Finally, in desperation, Mr. Hubbard and Mr. Sanders, his financial backers, insisted that my father delay no longer. So on February 14, 1876, my father filed his application for a patent for an electrical speaking telephone in the United States Government Patent Office. The very same day, several hours later, Elisha Gray, a prominent electrician, filed a caveat for a patent on a telephone. A caveat is a declaration of intention to work and is in itself evidence that the invention is not completed; while a patent is a specification for a completed successful machine, idea or method. Many of the suits hinged on these facts, Elisha Gray claiming Mr. Bell had stolen his invention and that the Patent Office was in collusion.

After my father's patents had been issued to him he received a letter from Elisha Gray asking permission to show my father's instruments in a lecture. My father replied granting permission on condition that Elisha Gray give public credit for the invention to my father. Later the newspaper accounts of Gray's lecture did not indicate that credit had been given, so my father wrote Elisha Gray for an explanation. Elisha Gray replied with an entirely satisfactory letter, stating that he had given my father credit in a public address and congratulating him upon inventing something he had tried unsuccessfully to work out. Fortunately for my father, he kept that letter. Later, the Western Union brought up Elisha Gray's claims and used them in a suit against the Telephone Company. At a criticial point in the proceedings the Bell Telephone Company's lawyers produced Elisha Gray's letter in his own handwriting. Elisha Gray had evidently forgotten he had ever written such a letter and had not advised the Western Union of the correspondence. This letter decided the case in favor of the Telephone Company. The Twentieth Century-Fox directors thought it was more romantic 5 to have my mother rush in at the dramatic moment in the hearing, and so twisted the facts to meet their needs. A letter, however, was the deciding factor and my father's love letters to my mother were part of the supplementary testimony in the suit.

My father realized that his telephone patent had been put in jeopardy because he had not kept notes as he went along with his laboratory work. So thereafter he made it a practice to keep very full records, not only of laboratory experiments, but ideas as they came to him. He kept what he called “Laboratory Notes” and “Home Notes.” He also kept copies of every letter he wrote and the replies. After his death we found piles upon piles of worthless letters and advertisements which had been as carefully preserved as the most valuable autographed letters. He published for private circulation the Beinn Bhreagh Recorder, a compilation of notes, letters and accounts of events which he considered interesting. He also had mimeographed for private circulation copies of the records of the Aerial Experiment Association. All of these publications as well as volumes of “Home Notes,” “Laboratory Notes,” and copies of letters written by my father and mother have been bound and are carefully preserved in the National Geographic Society. Some day we

hope a comprehensive biography of him will be published and this manuscript material will be invaluable.

All of his life my father was interested in education and with the education of the deaf particularly. He did not approve of the way science was taught in the schools of his day. He thought education should lead the pupil to discover the laws of nature for himself — that he should make his own deductions from experiments and not make experiments to prove the data given in his textbooks. How often have I heard him expound his theories 6 that students should be educated not instructed. In this connection he used to compare the educational methods of his day with the making of pate de fois gras , which he called the fatty degenerated liver of geese. He told of the geese being put in a wheel cage. Each goose as it reached the attendant was grasped firmly by the throat and fed forcibly with a stomach pump, then the wheel was given a turn and the next goose came along for his feeding. This made for fat goose liver at the expense of the general health of the geese. He compared this method to that in which grain was spread on the ground where the fowl could pick it up as they needed it. He stressed the point that there must be plenty of good food about for this method to be successful, and, as a corollary, that education and experiments must be even more carefully planned and supervised.